still we see the ghosts

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It was a rain that carried a story from another place.

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Author's Note:

> I had this idea since I found out the same chap who directed IT 2017 also directed MAMA.

It began with, as everything did, with the rain.

It swept in great gusts from the north, dragging woodland and leaves and dead animal carcasses that settled in a great swamp around the abandoned summer house. The water was grey in the morning, green in the swell of midday, and black by the early autumn night. Rain drilled the tin roof and guttered through broken windows and open gouges in the tiling. It stank of the decay of a viciously hot summer that had waded into a ferocious chill come late September.

It was a rain that carried a story from another place. *She* recalled a time previous where someone had said that to her. Or might have said, or did say, or never did at all. It was a confusing space that rattled around in her old head. Her face was twisted one way, eyes arranged like badly stitched buttons on a grey blue skin coat. Her head was made wrong, and the children had said when she was just a child – might have said, may have said, or never said at all – that her brains were scrambled one way up and one way down.

The rain continued for days. Even *she* could feel the damp on her crepe flesh. Her body was below water in the lagoon overlooked by the nearby cliff. She wondered idly if the river was falling from the sky, trying to cover her again, hide her away like a fossil.

The ruined summerhouse was empty of life, full of materials she did not recognise. The water was full of sounds she did not recognise. It screamed during the night, lashed and twisted in the wind.

The ragged bunch of trees on the hill that sprayed out toward the forest met the gravel path that lead to her house, and behind the French windows at the back the rain had created a makeshift lake that was fat with leaves and bracken that sailed like strange ships into the sunrise. *She* followed each and every one tirelessly, the husk

of her clothes dragging in the water as she led. She paused at the tip of water that fell over her jurisdiction, which ran into the waterfall that cascaded down a cliff that branched America out from under her like a patchwork quilt of green and red and gold. The rain covered it like a typhoon of falling ash.

She had stuck to her forest, her abandoned house, the footfalls of her haunt. She was without reason during the times when memory was far, made muddy by the roaring in her head. She had no reason to descend the waterfall, to be gripped by the gale and rain, to be borne east far, far from her home.

She heard a child in the wind. A child, sobbing. A myriad of sobs, a myriad of children, that seemed to cling to the singular baby wail that flooded her ears, attached to a phantom weight long gone from her arms.

She dissolved in the vapour of water, smudging out like a cloud in the grey, wet dreg, and the rain swept down east, and her house and her pathway and her forest disappeared in the moist, sticky swirl of the monsoon.

The rain blew down upon a mess of shrubbery, weeds and hard living plants that infested the outskirts of what she recognized as a town. Among the thick vegetation and dank water thick concrete pillars rose from out of the ground, open tops like gaping maws, kept in check by rusted griddling. The place stank of death, and of children. The rain had travelled over hills and forests and mountains and tiny towns, all clung together by new roads, new gas stations, hotels and restrooms, all of which she had slunk by as nothing more than a whisper.

But here, here was where the echo of the screams of the rain reverberated, seeming to thunder beneath the ground. This was where the pleas were the loudest. This was the story the rain had taken her to. The winds of the children's wails unplugged the rot in her vocal chords, and she glugged, gagged, tried to thrust comfort out of her contorted throat.

It carried her further to where the rain was heaviest, to a street full of neat houses, peppered with yellow cones and billboards and half flooded with water. There was a little boy, tiny body bent double in the street, leant towards a black gap below the pavement. Water rushed in past the boy's sneakers, weeds getting caught and mangled around the wet seat of his pants. An acid yellow raincoat hood hid the child's face from view.

The rain smudged her from mortal eyes. She trailed across the back of the road opposite the child, marveling at his little hands, his little shoes, this miniature person, so perfect for fitting into the crook and arch of your arm. A terrible ache rose in her hollow stomach and for a moment, lifted the mist from her eyes and the twist in her limbs. Through the rain, she caught the perky scent of child soap, adhesive and paper and….sweat.

The sweat of a *baby*, the iron chill of damp on young skin. She thought, hurriedly, of the tears and sweat that had gathered under her fingers at the break of the cliff. She had covered Lily's eyes - *Lily, her darling's name was Lily* - from the horror of what lay behind and in front of them.

She wanted to cover this baby's eyes too, to shield from whatever was hiding in the gutter, for it was not human and not like her. For all her bent out limbs, her scrambled brain face, she had come from a source that was singularly human, and that had been grief. Even in her muddled state, she *knew* that. But she could hear *IT* beneath the gurgle of the water around the child's shoes. There was blood in the air, seeping from the sewer in gusts of breath from the thing crouched there like a troll under a bridge.

Leering out at the child was a face, painted. Cracked paper white skin like the peeling plaster inside her summer house, autumn red nose and lips with streaks that licked up past the unnaturally bright blue eyes. In the shallow light that glided her through the rain, she saw flickers of yellow eating inside the iris. The creature's forehead was huge, like the smooth round end of an acorn. In its gloved hand it held aloft a paper boat.

The tiny hand reached inside the gape of the sewer drain. The paper boat, white as a snowdrop, was pulled in bit by bit, further into the

darkness, and the reluctant hand reached deeper and deeper.

She twisted her mouth open, clucking in warning, the rasp of her vocals pausing the little boy's hand, causing the small head to turn back and stare at the spectre loomed behind him.

Whatever Georgie would describe to his brother that afternoon, with his knee cut from where he had run and fell, and his throat sore from screaming (so much so he sounded as if he was catching his brother's flu) it would make no sense to anyone but himself. He had seen a woman, or at least the shape of a woman, all crooked like a crayon drawing, hair floating as if suspended in water. But that hadn't frightened him, not really. It was the crushing grip that had seized his arm, leaving blue yellow bruises all down his skin beneath his slicker, and the clown had opened his mouth, revealing teeth upon teeth upon teeth, all serrated like a great white shark.

She screamed, a shrill seizure of sound, and dove into the gutter, flapping and hissing like a huge dirty rag. The clown's peeled pink gums barely had time to recede before she struck him with immeasurable force. The thing's eyes, now rimmed in red around their natural mustard yellow, looked shocked, then wounded, then furious. They bounced down the drain, her thin piano string fingers tearing at Its face, its muted white frills and puffs, slicking blood from its enormous domed head.

She cracked bones, trying to rip open Its insides and scatter it through the pipes, although the stiff cotton gloves and silk seemed to be skin, for there was nothing beneath but more silk and cotton and of course, the creature's strange drifting blood. Finally, the clown gave a long, grieved howl, and sliced her across her face with a claw that grew from his glove like a weed, and whirled, like water down a plug, through a pipe and out of sight.

Back on the tarmac, where the rain still fell heavy, Georgie Denbrough hugged his arm and cried. It was as if, for a brief happy time, a spell had been broken. The elderly woman opposite shook her head, as if forcing away a malaise she didn't even know she had, and she saw the boy weeping beside the gutter and felt a stab of fear and relief. She opened her door, wrapping her frayed beige cardigan around her shoulders, and crossed her lawn to reach him. Inside her

cozy lounge, the little boy hiccupped back tears over hot chocolate and biscuits whilst her cat brushed lovingly against his mismatched socks.

Miss Green rang his parents, and could hear the soft notes of a piano fading in the background as she spoke to Mr. Denbrough, who walked the flooded streets to collect him, full of an urgency he couldn't explain, and thanked Miss Green for her kindness.

That night, the rain had thinned out to a fine drizzle. Georgie sat in his bedroom, the dim bulb of his Donald Duck lamp a dull orange burn on his bare arm. He counted the five bruises on his arm, four for fingers and one for thumb. Black had begun to stain beneath the yucky yellow and he rubbed it quickly, trying to stave off the sensation of cotton skin off his arm. *Cotton skin.* Georgie had used those exact words to describe it to Bill, who looked at him through his red puff powder eyes and visibly shuddered.

It was a nightmare, his big brother had said. *A-A p-p-prankster in t-t-the s-sewer. T-T-The w-woman was j-just m-m-mist in the r-rain and the big grey t-t-thing w-was a b-big c-cat or s-something.*

Maybe it had been a cat. The creature had made a strangled yowling sound, like a cat, and moved so quickly it could have been a stray, or even a feral wild cat, or maybe - he felt a streak of excitement despite the thudding in his chest - a coyote.

Still, the hour was late, and he knew so by the fact the soft friction of his parent's slippers had long since left the landing and even his brother's sniffs and coughs had stopped.

But, there was suddenly a new noise. A low, pleading croak, like a frog, burred through his curtains and reverberated through the room in a droning hum. The wind picked up, sending a draft that stank of dead leaves rattling through his room. The light in his Donald Duck stuttered. Through the Ninja Turtle pattern of his plastic ringed

curtains a series of spindle fingers began to emerge, curling like the legs of a spider.

A sick swell of terror rose in Georgie's gut and tumbled from his eyes in panicked tears.

The fingers continued pushing through, reaching for the drawstring to lever the curtains. Through the crack came a spill of wild grey hair. Georgie did not scream. His lungs had dried up like raisins. Instead, he dived for his covers, flinging green turtle print over his head, keeping his hands and feet close like a cocoon. In his mind, he saw a moon of a face, lips stretched up in red, eyes full of yellow like a cat's.

He thrusts his hands against the posts, and still he insists he sees the ghosts.

The croaking continued, ebbing out into a gentle moan. There was a slow swish of fabric as the drawstring was pulled, and the curtains parted. The very air seemed to groan as something moved through it. Georgie started to cry like a toddler.

The air was still, as if whatever had entered his bedroom had heard his cry. There came a crinkling as something was laid on the table beside his bed, next to the Donald Duck nightlight.

Georgie must have slept (or fainted) for the next thing he knew, sunlight was peeking under his covers, a rim of comforting normalcy shining beneath the peak of his duvet. Relief flooded through him. The little boy tentatively shifted the covers aside, smelling the brisk autumn morning and the freshness that came just after rain.

Sunshine glittered through the dewdrops on his window. The curtains were open, swaying slightly in the wind. The drawstring dangled innocently. Georgie knew his mother would be cross with him for leaving the window open, in case he got sick like Bill.

His Donald Duck was still on, the meek bulb no contest with the sun, and as Georgie turned to switch it off, he froze.

Sat beside it was his paper boat. It was a little damp, and the ink had

run on the *SS Georgie* scrawl on the side, but it was there, all the same.

Georgie reached for it and turned it over in his hands, just to see if it was real. He looked toward the open window as his mother called him for breakfast.